

Strategies to Assess and Instruct Struggling Readers

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As a teacher of Exceptional Children, my students' reading readiness level is influenced by factors such as behavioral impairments, autism, processing deficits, and other challenges. For all my students, assessing each to find their reading strengths and weaknesses is the first step to promoting their success. Curriculum Associates' Comprehensive Assessment of Reading Strategies lets me quickly find where weaknesses exist so I can choose the best strategies for each child.

The first thing I do with the primary students is determining what letters they recognize and what sounds they know. If they don't know the letters and/or sounds, I start working on those first, and then begin reading stories with them aloud so they can see those letters and hear the sounds. Building their vocabulary is a very important part of teaching comprehension skills. Once I know that students understand the phonics and have mastered recognizing letters and sounds, then we go on to high-frequency sight words. This helps me see how effective their memory is and shows whether they are a sight reader or a phonetic reader. I help them build their self-esteem and confidence by guiding them with these words and giving them clues on how to recognize and process them in their daily reading. Once students have a strong base in phonics and vocabulary, the following strategies help them improve their comprehension and become successful readers.

For K-2 Students

- a. I first assess and use decodable texts that reinforce consonant and vowel sounds. This is done with very short one-line stories that are on audiotape or in a song. The stories and songs use the same long- or short-vowel sound throughout, so the students hear that sound many times. This helps the student hear the same vowel sound with different consonants, digraphs, and blends.
- b. After reading a story, we identify the words that have the same vowel sound, as well as high-frequency sight words that were in the story. An example is "A cat with a hat comes in. He is in the band. A bat with a mat comes in. He is in the band." The beginning consonant in each word changes, while the /a/ sound and the ending sound stay the same.
- c. To help my students be successful in their regular-education classes, we often complete or review work from those classes during our time together. I find out what vocabulary words they will see in class, review them orally and ask students if the words have anything in common, such as beginning sounds, ending sounds, or vowels. This allows students to

practice analyzing and categorizing words. We also use picture cues from their stories and workbook to help them decode words and infer what is going on in the story.

For 3-5 Students

- a. I use an assessment to find each student's word identification skill level.
- b. Then, I assign or let them select a book with words on that level.
- c. Once students feel comfortable reading the book and understand the words, we focus on comprehending the text.
- d. I ask the students questions about the story and let them use the book to find the answers. This allows them to learn to look for fact and details and then the main idea. Then, we discuss the author's purpose before moving on to other basic skills that lead to comprehension, such as cause and effect, inference, and sequencing. I do not remove the book and force the student to use their memory skills yet, because they need to become familiar with using the book and finding the key words.
- e. If students find the right page and paragraph but still cannot find the answer, we look into the syntax of the sentences and see whether they are still trying to remember each individual word or the meaning of the story.
- f. Next, I use specific questions that lead the students for such skills as cause and effect, comparing and contrasting, or drawing conclusions and making inferences about the text that lead to better comprehension.
- g. Some students know the meaning of the words but not the way they are used in the story. When this happens, I give them strategies to remember the words and how the words relate. This helps them infer the meaning of words in the story.
- h. Finally, I assess students' progress using Curriculum Associates' Comprehensive Assessment of Reading Strategies II.

Combining a variety of strategies and comprehension questions helps my students recognize words and determine the meaning of texts. For all my students, regardless of grade level, I use a systematic approach; for example, I focus on repeating the words several times, showing how they are related, and having them repeat the words to me emphasizing the individual sounds on consistent basis. I am very explicit and direct in my instruction. My students learn how to break down comprehension questions to determine exactly what each is looking for. Teaching the specific foundational skills that lead to comprehension and doing so in a systematic manner is the key in helping the struggling reader.